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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000275

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KIRF SA

SUBJECT: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON THE SHI'A "SHIRAZIS"

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Kamal Al-Khattee, son of a former Shi'a judge in Qatif, discussed with PolOff the evolution of the Shi'a faction known as the "Shirazis," who include Hassan Al-Saffar, Jafar Al-Shayeb, Tawfiq Al-Sayf, and others. According to Al-Khattee, they moved from Iran to Syria and elsewhere in the 1980s after feeling "used" by Iran. Now back in Saudi Arabia, they are trying to gain acceptance by more traditional religious figures by focusing on serving the community. Al-Khattee, a non-practicing Shi'a who lives in Riyadh, also discussed discrimination faced by the Shi'a from the perspective of someone living outside the Shi'a community. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Al-Khattee and his daughter Zainab visited PolOff on January 18 to discuss an expedited visa appointment for Zainab, who has received a scholarship from the Saudi government for study in the U.S. Al-Khattee lives in Riyadh and most recently worked as a researcher for Prince Abdul-Aziz bin Fahd (septel).

Marked as a Shi'a

¶3. (C) Al-Khattee agreed with PolOff's observation that the Saudi government seemed to be awarding scholarships for study abroad to Shi'a students in proportion to their numbers, i.e. without discrimination. He said that the discrimination Shi'a faced did not come from government degrees or regulations, but from individuals and groups of individuals in the government and elsewhere. "I am a non-practicing Shi'a and I live in Riyadh, not Qatif. Yet everyone looks at me as a Shi'a; there is no way I could escape it." Al-Khattee gave an example of the sort of discrimination Shi'a faced from his daughter's experience. "Zainab got excellent overall marks, especially in math and science. She passed the exam for King Saud University. When she went for her interviews, things were fine with six of the seven committeees. But professor on the seventh committee gave her a hard time for no reason and wouldn't accept any of her answers." That professor, Al-Khattee suggested, torpedoed Zainab's application because she was Shi'a. "But the problem here is we have no way of claiming our rights. We can't take any cases to the legal system. If we tried to accuse one person with discrimination, everyone would close ranks around him."

¶4. (C) Asked by PolOff if there were any independent Shi'a civil society organizations based in Qatif or elsewhere that could help Shi'a claim their rights, Al-Khattee laughed. "They (the Saudi government) will never give up control of the Eastern Province - it's too precious to them." He noted that reformers, who one might think would be pressing the government for an increased role for civil society, currently had no clear public agenda or direction. "Some of them are Islamists, like Abdullah Al-Hamid. He says he wants an "Islamic democracy" but that's impossible in practice. But then you have others, like Ali Al-Dumaini, who are liberal." (Note: Al-Hamid and Al-Dumaini are two of the three reformers King Abdullah pardoned shortly after he became King. End note.)

The Shirazis and Their Evolution

¶5. (C) PolOff observed that there were some active members of the Shi'a community, like Jafar Al-Shayeb, who espoused the principles of democracy and human rights, yet whose underlying motivation for political activism was not fully clear. "Yes, the Shirazis - they are Islamists, but they are evolving," Al-Khattee responded. He explained that, although they did not fully agree with Ayatollah Khomeini's political philosophy, the Shirazis sought refuge in Iran in the early

1980s following the Saudi crackdown on Eastern Province Shi'a. They left Iran later in the 1980s because, according to Al-Khattee, "The Iranians told them to claim responsibility for an explosion at a (Saudi) refinery. Al-Saffar refused, saying oil was Saudi Arabia's national treasure and he would not claim responsibility for an attack against it. So he went to Syria, and others from the movement, like Tawfiq Al-Sayf, went to London and even the U.S." The move from Iran was good for Saudi members of the Shirazi movement, Al-Khattee claimed, especially those who lived in the west, because it exposed them to other political philosophies, including western principles of democracy and human rights.

¶16. (C) Al-Khattee noted that Ayatollah Shirazi, despite his prodigious writings, was not considered learned enough by mainstream Shi'a religious authorities to be a marja'. Therefore, he continued, many of the Saudi Shi'a who followed Shirazi are now trying to bridge the gap between them and more traditional religious figures by applying themselves to working in the community's interest, for example through the municipal council. Contrasting the Shirazis who, like Jafar Al-Shayeb, won seats on Qatif's municipal council with a liberal like Zaki Abu Al Saud, who was not successful in his bid, Al-Khattee said, "Zaki had a lot going for him - he is intelligent, respected, a banker, and from a well-established family. But they (the Shirazi's) had the organizational tools. And they didn't even use all the tools at their disposal in the elections."

Comment

¶17. (C) This meeting was post's first with Al-Khattee (brief bio note septel). We think he has the potential to be a valuable contact on the EP Shi'a community: he is well-connected and politically minded, and his choice to live in Riyadh and distance himself somewhat from Qatif's political scene seems to have given him a greater degree of objectivity than many of our other Shi'a contacts. End comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
OBERWETTER